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East leg of S. Mtn. Freeway vital

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One momentous decision down and one to go.

By wisely selecting a 55th Avenue connection to Interstate 10 for the western leg of the South Mountain Freeway, the Arizona Department of Transportation now can turn its full attention to a decision on the eastern leg.

The agency must not delay.

It's time to move forward and start the route, whether along Pecos Road (as proposed for the past two decades), on reservation lands of the Gila River Indian Community, or in some other configuration that makes engineering and financial sense and displaces the least number of citizens and businesses. A no-build alternative would be a huge step in the wrong direction.

The essential thing is to maintain the momentum from ADOT's decision to pick 55th Avenue over 99th Avenue. We need a consensus, and the sooner the better, on the much-delayed South Mountain Freeway if we are to make a significant dent in the Valley's worsening congestion.

A draft environmental impact statement that will focus on the 55th Avenue alignment and present options for the eastern leg is expected to be ready next January. After a period for public comment, ADOT plans to issue a final impact statement in the fall of 2007, followed by design and the purchase of rights of way.

"If we turn dirt before 2009, we'll be lucky," ADOT Director Victor Mendez says. The agency would like to complete the 22- to 26-mile freeway by 2015. The time frame should be doable.

ADOT's scrutiny of alternatives for the western leg produced the right alignment, and we encourage ADOT to give the eastern leg the same sort of diligence.

Despite a citizen advisory team's recommendation for 99th Avenue, the 55th Avenue link-up makes far better sense from a regional point of view, according to a traffic analysis conducted by the Maricopa Association of Governments.

Key to a good traffic distribution are these other projects on the drawing board and funded by Proposition 400 monies: The I-10 reliever, a parallel east-west freeway about six miles south of I-10 in the West Valley that will run from the South Mountain Freeway westward to Loop 303; the Loop 303 along the Cotton Lane alignment; and a widened I-10.

It's good that ADOT did not look just at traffic flows in reaching its decision. Other factors rightfully were part of the decision.

The cost will be about \$700 million less, an important consideration in this period of escalating prices for materials and labor. The 55th Avenue decision also displaces fewer residents and is consistent with Phoenix's planning in the area for the past 20 years.

Moreover, it has fewer sociological impacts, a vital consideration given the fact that a 99th Avenue decision would have caused an unconscionable economic hardship for the small community of Tolleson if it had lost its economic development corridor.

Barring any problems that the impact statement may turn up for the 55th Avenue alignment, that segment is virtually set. It's time to devote planning and energy to the eastern leg. The sooner that decision is made, the faster the South Mountain Freeway can become a factor in easing congestion.

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